

Everything But Carry a Rifle:  
An Article Examining the Members of the  
Women's Army Corps and their Relationship to Guns  
LAURE Award Reflective Essay

My first research experience with Miami Libraries came during my first year visiting the Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives to investigate the Smith Journals, a set of student-written diaries from the 20th century. I was looking for reactions to the female military at Miami University during World War II: the Women Marines, the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), and the SPAR (Coast Guard Women's Reserve). I found more on the Navy presence than the women service members and agitation over busy laundromats. However, the idea of opinions and experience informing historical records stayed with me.

As a 2022 Honors History cohort member, I am researching and writing an undergraduate thesis. Over the summer, I choose to continue my research as an Undergraduate Summer Scholar. My thesis discusses the Women's Army Corps (WACs) and their approach to guns during World War II and what the American public knew and believed. The article I am submitting for this award covers the first chapter of the thesis. Other chapters discuss the change in perceived sexuality of WAC members and examine why and to what extent non-American military women handling guns could be acceptable.

Miami University Libraries and library resources have heavily impacted my research methods and journey. I checked out books and looked through the online catalog to find articles on various topics: from archivists turned spies in World War II, endpapers in books, Catherine De Medici, the women of the Lost Generation, and even female international students at Western College in the mid-1800s.

My cohort visited the archives early on to look at primary sources related to our preliminary research topics. While there are not many WAC-related holdings, Rachel Makarowski found a fiction book in Special Collections written and published during the war; it proved valuable to understanding the American public's perceptions about the WACs. Again, my interest in contemporary opinions of historical events was sparked again; I realized I wanted to research the WACs no matter how I wandered.

In a previous class focusing on the World Wars, we consulted the Imperial War Museum's website; I thought it might provide further insight for my thesis. Ultimately, while looking at their digital collections, I discovered a photograph of two WACs with pistols.<sup>1</sup> As a World War II reenactor, I'd frequently heard the question "Did WACs have guns?" posed at public events, answered with a solid "No." This photograph and being told that WACs never handled guns made me realize there was an exciting interaction between what the Army said and what the Army did — or at least what individuals in the Army did.

I realized the presentation of the WAC to the American people during WWII would be vital to understanding this discrepancy. The best way to start understanding that is to read the news. The New York Times and other historical newspaper databases the library offers were invaluable. The articles as sources make up an entire page of the bibliography section and several pages of analysis. The articles revealed cultural attitudes, opinions, and specific stories that created a complete picture.

Jenny Presnell, the history librarian, met with me to help me figure out search terms that would save me time and show me the sources I needed. Determining what terms these articles might use other than 'gun' to locate other primary and secondary sources. Presnell pointed me to

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<sup>1</sup> Imperial War Museum, "United States Womens Army Corps in Britain During the Second World War."

the correct database to search for congressional hearings and debates, which became vital to understanding the legal issues surrounding if the Army could issue weapons.

Discussions with a library technician on archive visitation procedures gave me the confidence to reach out to external research institutions. Without that encouragement and suggestions from knowledgeable library staff, I would not have reached out to expand my research, and I would have missed valuable sources and stories.

At the start of the summer, I thought I would be going to archives in Texas, Georgia, and hopefully the Library of Congress (LOC) and the National Archives in D.C. But, Covid restrictions forced me to think beyond going in person. I hired a proxy researcher for the archive in Georgia since they weren't allowing visitors outside their university. The National Archives didn't open to external visitors until late fall. The papers I thought were in Texas turned out to be at the LOC. My thesis advisor Dr. Kimberly Hamlin connected me with a staff member at the Library to learn how best to utilize the LOC holdings.

My experiences at Miami's Archives prepared me for the procedures at the Library of Congress. Since the Library staff in Oxford normally wear business casual, I thought it would be appropriate for the LOC. While looking at letters to the first WAC director, I was mistaken for a Library of Congress employee by another researcher. Luckily, I answered his question correctly and found valuable sources for my research.

It turned out that people were my best resources, from Miami Librarians' advice to Dr. Hamlin's LOC contact to the very lovely archivists at the NARA College Park and the FDR Presidential Library. They all helped me navigate databases and catalog collections, pointing me directly to sources. Members of my reenactment unit helped me find the congressional bills by

knowing the number codes and suggested secondary sources. Classmates who shared relevant articles and asked thought-provoking questions I hadn't thought to address.

The research methods I utilized in pursuit of this topic are preparing me for other research subjects of personal interest and doing content research in my career while pursuing a Master's Degree in Museum studies. I've learned to utilize various resources and communicate effectively with content experts through this research. You never know who will ask the question that sparks a new idea or who will fill in a missing gap. I enjoy research because I love learning new things. I love sharing what I've learned and see how that knowledge can mean something valuable to someone else.